

TRUCKS & TRANSPORTATION

Weight Limits: Myths vs. Facts Traffic: Volume & Impact Funding: An Issue of Fairness



A Position Paper from the Michigan Department of Transportation – February 1998

TRUCKS & TRANSPORTATION

Michigan Department of Transportation: Delivering Michigan's Economic Expansion

As we continue our comprehensive examination of transportation in Michigan, there is increased attention being focused on issues involving commercial trucks in the state. This position paper will focus on: the issue of Michigan's truck weight limits; the volume of commercial traffic in the state; the impact of this traffic on the surface condition of Michigan roads; and the contribution to transportation funding that comes from commercial trucking.

Carrying half the total freight in Michigan, the trucking industry is a large and complex component of the state's total transportation system and a major contributor to our economic livelihood. Trucks are a necessary element of all industrial sectors – especially Michigan's vital manufacturing, agriculture, wholesale, retail and construction industries. Michigan's economy continues to move forward, with noticeable contributions from the commercial trucking industry.

Weight Limits:

Myths vs. Facts

It is true that Michigan law allows for heavier overall truck weights than most other states. In most states, the maximum gross vehicle weight for commercial trucks is 80,000 pounds, while the maximum gross vehicle weight in Michigan is 164,000 pounds. For years some have argued that Michigan should reduce its truck weight limits to conform to the 40-ton limit in most other states.

First, we must dispel the myth that nearly every truck on the road today is an 80-ton behemoth that is literally destroying the road beneath it as it moves. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, there are fewer heavy trucks than most people realize – and those nearing Michigan's highest weight limit are virtually insignificant when compared with the total number of trucks traveling our roads.

We need to put this issue into perspective. There are approximately 108,000 commercial trucks **registered** in the state of Michigan, and only 15,000 of these carry more than 80,000 pounds. We conservatively estimate that at least 300,000 trucks **operate** in the state, most from other states. *This means that less than five percent of all trucks that operate in the state of Michigan carry more than 80,000 pounds – or only one out of every 20 trucks on the road.* Also, there are only about 850 trucks registered at the maximum weight allowed by Michigan law (160,000-164,000 pounds), which is less than one out of every 350 trucks on the road.

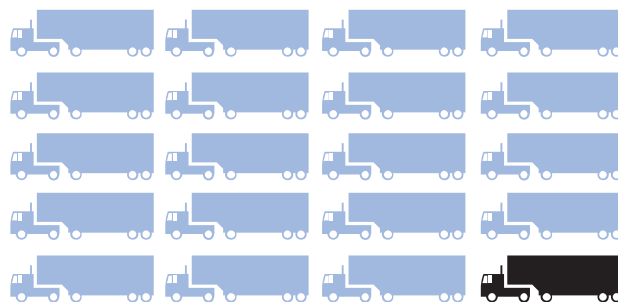
Second, we should explore the impact of higher truck weight limits on the surface condition of our roads. According to research studies conducted by MDOT, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and the National Research Council, pavement damage is directly related to axle load, *not* gross vehicle weight. Because of this, Michigan's weight-per-axle guidelines address the potential impact of truck weights on the condition of our roads. In Michigan, the law requires additional axles as gross vehicle weight increases, with most trucks carrying between 13,000-16,000 pounds per axle, compared to the average of 17,000-20,000

pounds per axle in other states. This provision more evenly distributes the weight among a greater number of axles, leading to less damage to our roads.

In the final analysis, if Michigan were to reduce the gross vehicle weight limit for trucks, it is estimated that an additional 12,000-15,000 trucks would be added to our roads. The way to address concerns about trucking is not to put thousands of additional trucks into the system.

Increases in truck traffic from a change in truck weight limits would lead to increased costs for commercial trucking, and these costs are likely to be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices for products. Also, there would be an increase in safety concerns due to greater congestion and potential accidents. It is clear that our current law promotes a more efficient and safer transportation system.

Commercial Truck Weights in Michigan



Only one in 20 trucks operating in Michigan weighs more than 80,000 pounds.

Traffic:

Volume & Impact

Michigan roads, highways and bridges have never had to accommodate the volume of traffic we are now experiencing. According to MDOT statistics, the overall number of Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) on the state trunkline system has increased approximately 30 percent over the past ten years. Michigan's current economic expansion combined with increasing reliance on just-in-time delivery; historically low unemployment rates; and higher-than-ever travel and tourism activities all serve as major contributors to this explosion in traffic. Looking at *all* the factors which affect the surface condition of our roads, age, traffic and weather are among the most critical.

Unfortunately, recent media attention erroneously suggested that commercial truck traffic has nearly tripled on many Michigan roads since 1990. Less publicized is the fact that in the early 1990s MDOT changed the manner by which it reports Average Daily Traffic (ADT) statistics for commercial truck traffic to a method that is statistically more accurate and reliable than the "estimates" it reported prior to 1990. While truck traffic clearly has been on the rise, the contention that truck traffic has nearly tripled in less than a decade is both inaccurate and misleading.

MDOT's highest priority is to preserve and maintain our existing infrastructure. Based on increased transportation funding from Governor Engler's *Build Michigan II* plan, we will be able to dedicate even more resources to repairing and rebuilding our roads. Michigan roads, highways and bridges are designed and built to withstand *both* passenger vehicles and commercial truck traffic. The incremental cost increases associated with compliance with Michigan's higher truck weight limits are nearly insignificant.

“The economic contribution of a thriving commercial trucking industry cannot be measured by simply looking at a dollars in vs. dollars out equation.”

Funding:

An Issue of Fairness

Questions have been raised as to whether trucks are paying their fair share of transportation funding in the state. As with passenger cars, drivers of commercial trucks pay annual vehicle registration fees and taxes on diesel fuel. A recently updated cost allocation study from the Federal Highway Administration estimates that trucks may be responsible for up to 40 percent of the costs to design, build, repair and maintain the roads upon which they travel. In 1995, the trucking industry contributed \$207 million, or roughly 15 percent, of the Michigan Transportation Fund.

Recent legislative efforts, spearheaded by Governor Engler, have led to our obtaining a fairer share of transportation funding from commercial trucks. The “diesel discount” was eliminated legislatively in late 1996, and increased payments of \$28 million per year being collected in 1997. Additionally, under *Build Michigan II*, truck registration fees were increased 30 percent and other permit fees for trucks were increased, raising just over \$40 million per year. This means that trucks are now paying an additional \$70 million per year toward transportation. These increases are noteworthy and welcome. However, there is still a gap between the amount contributed by trucks for transportation funding – and the costs for which they are responsible.

How much should we collect from commercial trucking? How much can we collect before increased fees are regressive and hinder the economy? There is no doubt as to the clear societal benefits from trucks in Michigan. The economic contribution of a thriving commercial trucking industry cannot be measured by simply looking at a “dollars in vs. dollars out” equation.

The gas tax increase – passed in 1997 – was imposed on passenger automobiles, but not on commercial trucks. Legislation currently pending in Lansing contains language to increase the motor carrier fuel tax on diesel fuel by four cents per gallon. This increase would bring the nominal rate of diesel fuel to 19-cents-per-gallon, and would raise an additional \$30 million per year for transportation. ***Governor Engler and the Michigan Department of Transportation support this diesel tax increase as a matter of equity among all drivers using Michigan roads.*** Fairness dictates that truckers should pay the same 19-cents-per-gallon state tax on diesel fuel that motorists are paying for gasoline.



Conclusion:

Trucks & Transportation

The issues affecting trucks and transportation are numerous and complex. We hope this position paper has cleared up some of the confusion about Michigan's truck weight limits, the volume of commercial traffic in the state, the impact of this traffic on the surface condition of our roads, and the contribution to transportation funding that comes from trucking.

At the Michigan Department of Transportation we are improving our total transportation system through efficiently delivering transportation products, services and information. If you have further concerns about this or any current transportation issue, please contact us.

For More Information:

Office of Communications
Michigan Department of Transportation
P.O. Box 30050
Lansing, Michigan 48909

517-373-2160
517-373-8518 (Fax)

For extensive information, please visit our Web site at:
<http://www.mdot.state.mi.us>

